

"Do not have children if they won't be healthy!"

By Tamara Traubmann

A SHOCKING new study reveals how key figures in the pre-state Zionist establishment proposed castrating the mentally ill, sterilizing the poor and doing everything possible to ensure reproduction only among the 'best of people.'

Castrating the mentally ill, encouraging reproduction among families "numbered among the intelligentsia" and limiting the size of "families of Eastern origin" and "preventing ... lives that are lacking in purpose" -- these proposals are not from some program of the Third Reich but rather were brought up by key figures in the Zionist establishment of the Land of Israel during the period of the British Mandate.

It turns out there was a great deal of enthusiasm here for the improvement of the hereditary characteristics of a particular race (eugenics). This support, which has been kept under wraps for many years, is revealed in a study that examines the ideological and intellectual roots at the basis of the establishment of the health system in Israel.

In the *Yishuv* (pre-state Jewish community) in the 1930s there were "consultation stations" operating on a Viennese model of advice centers for couples that wished to marry and become parents.

In Austria, with the Nazis' rise to power, they served for forced treatment. Here the stations were aimed at "giving advice on matters of sex and marriage, especially in the matter of preventing pregnancy in certain cases." They distributed birth- control devices for free to the penniless and at reduced prices to those of limited means. In Tel Aviv the advice stations were opened in centers of immigrant populations: Ajami in Jaffa, the Hatikvah Quarter and Neveh Sha'anani.

These are some of the findings of a doctoral thesis written by **Sachlav Stoler- Liss** about the history of the health services in the 1950s, under the supervision of Prof. **Shifra Shvarts**, head of the department of health system management at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. They were presented at the annual conference of the Israel Anthropological Association at Ben-Gurion College.

The father of the theory of eugenics was British scholar **Francis Galton**. It was he who coined the term -- which literally means "well-born" -- at the end of the 19th century. The aim of the eugenics movement was to better the human race. Galton proposed a plan to encourage reproduction among "the best people" in society and to prevent reproduction among "the worst elements."

Forced sterilization

Between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, Galton drew many followers and his ideas spread rapidly to other countries in Europe (among them Germany, France, Italy, Denmark, Sweden and Belgium), to the United States and to some countries in South America. In various countries laws were passed that allowed for the forced sterilization of "hereditary paupers, criminals, the feeble-minded, tuberculous, shiftless and ne'er-do-wells." In the United States, up until 1935, about 20,000 people -- "insane," "feeble-minded," immigrants, members of ethnic minorities and people with low IQs -- were forcibly sterilized, most of them in California. The Californian law was revoked only in 1979.

According to Dr. **Philip Reilly**, a doctor and executive director of the Shriver Center for Mental Retardation, in 1985 at least 19 states in the United States had laws that allowed the sterilization of people with mental retardation, (among them Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Minnesota, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, Vermont, Utah and Montana).

"Eugenics is considered to be something that only happened in Germany," says Stoler-Liss. "Germany was indeed the most murderous manifestation of eugenics, but in fact it was a movement that attracted many followers. In every place it took on a unique, local aspect. It is interesting to note that both in Germany and in Israel a link was made between eugenics, health and nationalism."

Stoler-Liss first encountered the eugenics texts of doctors from the *Yishuv* when looking for instruction books for parents for a research project for her master's degree. "I presented a text at a thesis seminar and then the instructor of the workshop said to me, 'But why aren't you saying that this is a translated text?' I replied: 'No, no, the text isn't translated.' 'In Israel,' he said, 'there are no such things.'"

She decided to look into whether there was only anecdotal and non-representative evidence, doctors and public figures here and there who supported eugenics -- and she found many publications that promoted eugenics. Supporters of the idea were key figures in the emerging medical establishment in Palestine; the people who managed and created the Israeli health system.

One of the most prominent eugenicists of the Mandatory period was Dr. **Joseph Meir**, a well-known doctor who acquired his education in Vienna, served for about 30 years as the head of the Kupat Holim Clalit health maintenance organization, and after whom the Meir Hospital in Kfar Sava is named. "From his position at the very heart of the Zionist medical establishment in the land of Israel in the mid-1930s, he brought young mothers the gospel of eugenics, warned them about degeneracy and transmitted the message to them about their obligation and responsibility for bearing only healthy children," says Stoler-Liss.

Thus, for example, in 1934 Dr. Meir published the following text on the first page of "Mother and Child," a guide for parents that he edited for publication by Kupat Holim:

"Who is entitled to give birth to children? The correct answer is sought by eugenics, the science of improving the race and preserving it from degeneration. This science is still young, but its positive results are already great and important - These cases [referring to marriages of people with hereditary disorders -- T.T.] are not at all rare in all nations and in particular in the Hebrew nation that has lived a life of exile for 1,800 years. And now our nation has returned to be reborn, to a natural life in the land of the Patriarchs. Is it not our obligation to see to it that we have whole and healthy children in body and soul? For us, eugenics as a whole, and the prevention of the transmission of hereditary disorders in particular, even greater value than for all other nations! ... Doctors, people involved in sport and the national leaders must make broad propaganda for the idea: Do not have children if you are not certain that they will be healthy in body and soul!"

'Problematic and dangerous'

In its full version, the article, which was published in the "Health Guard" section of the now defunct labor Zionist newspaper *Davar*, the doctor proposed castrating the mentally ill. Stoler-Liss found many more examples in the "Mother and Child" books that were published in 1934 and 1935 and in journals like *Eitanim*, which was edited by Dr. Meir. "The support of Dr. Meir and other senior people in the health system for these ideas has been kept under wraps for many years," claims Stoler-Liss. No one today talks about this chapter in the history of the *Yishuv*. In the mid-1950s Dr. Meir's articles were collected into a book that came out in his memory. The article mentioned above was not included in it. Stoler-Liss found a card file with notes scribbled by the editors of the volume. They defined the article as "problematic and dangerous." "Now, after Nazi eugenics," wrote one of the editors, "it is dangerous to publish this article." During the latter part of the 1930s, adds Stoler-Liss, when word came out about the horrors that eugenics in its extreme form is likely to cause, they stopped using this word, which was attributed to the Nazis. Overnight eugenics organizations and journals changed their names and tried to shake off any signs of this theory. Dr. Meir, however, during all the years he was active, continued to promote the ideas of eugenics. At the beginning of the 1950s he published an article in which he harshly

criticized the reproduction prize of 100 lirot that David Ben-Gurion promised to every mother who gave birth to 10 children.

"We have no interest in the 10th child or even in the seventh in poor families from the East ... In today's reality we should pray frequently for a second child in a family that is a part of the intelligentsia. The poor classes of the population must not be instructed to have many children, but rather restricted."

"I'm not making a value judgment," says Stoler-Liss. "Zionism arose at a certain period, in a certain ideological atmosphere -- there were all kinds of ideas in the air and there were also eugenicist Zionists. Some of the doctors were educated in Europe, and at that time the medical schools taught not only medicine but also the theory of eugenics."

Judaism of muscle

Dr. Meir was not the first Zionist leader who supported eugenics. According to studies by Dr. **Raphael Falk**, a geneticist and historian of science and medicine at Hebrew University, other major Zionist thinkers -- among them Dr. **Max Nordau**, **Theodor Herzl's** colleague, a doctor and a publicist, and Dr. **Arthur Ruppin**, the head of the World Zionist Organization office in the Land of Israel -- presented the ideas of eugenics as one of the aims of the Jewish movement for national renewal and the settlement of the land.

Prof. **Meira Weiss**, an anthropologist of medicine at Hebrew University, describes in her book "The Chosen Body" how the settlement of the land and work on the land were perceived by these Zionist thinkers as the "cure" that would restore the health of the Jewish body that had degenerated in the Diaspora. In Nordau's terms, a "Judaism of muscle" would replace "the Jew of the coffee house: the pale, skinny, Diaspora Jew. "At a time when many Europeans are calling for a policy of eugenics, the Jews have never taken part in the 'cleansing' of their race but rather allowed every child, be it the sickest, to grow up and marry and have children like himself. Even the mentally retarded, the blind and the deaf were allowed to marry," wrote Ruppin in his book *"The Sociology of the Jews."* "In order to preserve the purity of our race, such Jews [with signs of degeneracy -- T.T.] must refrain from having children."

"Many people dealt with eugenics as a theoretical issue," says Stoler- Liss. "They even set up a Nordau Club with the aim of researching the racial aspects of the Jewish people and ways of improving it. What was special about Dr. Meir and the group that

joined him was that for them eugenics was a very practical matter." They wanted to pursue applied eugenics.

The main institution was the advice station. The first station was opened in 1931 in Beit Strauss on Balfour Street in Tel Aviv. The aim was to work in "pleasant ways," through persuasion and choice. As Stoler-Liss explains:

"Why should people work against their personal interests? It is here that the connection to the national interest comes in. If I understand that by having a baby I will harm the national interest, the building of the land, the 'new Jew,' I will refrain from giving birth. But just to make certain, Meir told the doctors, in the event that a woman comes to you who is 'a risk' for giving birth to a sick baby, it is your obligation to make certain that she has an abortion."

"Gynecologist **Miriam Aharonova** also wrote extensively on the subject of eugenics," adds Stoler-Liss. "In articles for parents under headings such as 'The Hygiene of Marriage' she gives a list of eugenic instructions for parents -- from the recommended age for giving birth (between 20 and 25), to the recommended difference in age between the father and the mother (the reason for which is the betterment of the race) to a list of diseases that could infect the spouse or "be transmitted through heredity to their descendents after them."

In the diseases, she mentions "syphilis, gonorrhea, tuberculosis, alcoholism, narcotics addiction (fondness for morphine, cocaine, etc.) and diseases of the mind and the nerves." In the volume of "Mother and Child" published in 1935, says Stoler-Liss, the publication and discussions by doctors who supported eugenics was greatly expanded. Why, in fact, did they not use force? The establishment had a great deal of power over immigrants and refugees.

"The medical establishment's power was limited at that time. This was an establishment that developed hand in hand with the system it was supposed to strengthen and suffered from constant shortages: a shortage of doctors, a shortage of nurses and a shortage of equipment. It had to examine, treat, inoculate and so on. We are talking about the period of the British Mandate. When at long last there was a state, eugenics theory declined. My explanation is the change of generations: that generation had come to an end professionally, and a new generation with more national motivation came

along that was not educated at the European universities during that period. They had already seen what the Nazis had done with it and the ideological identification was lower. The ideas themselves seeped in but they're not using the same rhetoric."

Have eugenics really vanished?

The eugenic chapter in the history of Western culture has been closed, but have eugenics really disappeared?

"Eugenic thinking is alive and well today," asserts Stoler-Liss. "It is expressed mainly in the very high rate of pre-natal tests and genetic filtering [of genetically deviant fetuses]. Mothers are very highly motivated to give birth only to healthy children and the attitude toward the exceptional, the different and the handicapped in Israeli society is problematic."

At hospitals today future parents are offered a plethora of genetic tests that diagnose the fetus before birth. Some of them are aimed at identifying serious disorders, like Tay-Sachs disease, a degenerative disease that causes a painful death in infancy. Others, however, are aimed at screening fetuses with conditions like deafness and sterility, the bearers of which can lead full and satisfying lives.■

FAIR USE NOTICE: This material may contain copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available in our efforts to advance understanding of criminal justice, political, human rights, economic, democracy, scientific, and social justice issues, etc. We believe this constitutes a 'fair use' of any such copyrighted material as provided for in section 107 of the US Copyright Law. In accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107, this material is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving the included information for research and educational purposes. For more information go to: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml>. If you wish to use copyrighted material from this site for purposes of your own that go beyond 'fair use', you must obtain permission from the copyright owner.